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MONEY

How Theater Actors Are Surviving During the Pandemic

BY DIEP TRAN | AUGUST 18, 2020 1:00 PM



Photo Source: Caroline Attwood/Unsplash

The COVID pandemic has hit many industries hard, but theater artists have had more trouble than most getting back on their feet, and many are facing dwindling options with no federal safety net to fall back on.

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For the many theater professionals Backstage spoke to for this story, it's been a challenge to pivot their current skill sets to find work in other functioning industries. Some are leaning on screen or VO credits—two sectors of the entertainment industry that have continued or begun to pick production back up. Meanwhile, one actor said that they're getting their life insurance license. Another said they started to market themselves as a [speaking coach](#) for corporate entities. Others have started doing voiceover and virtual plays, but in the COVID market where there are [three unemployed people for every job opening](#), it is not a lack of will but rather increased competition in an already competitive environment that's keeping people from making ends meet beyond the theater space.

Actors on the Job Hunt

Since June, Griffin and her husband, also an actor, have sent their résumés out for countless production assistant, social media, and administrative assistant jobs. Last month, Griffin managed to find work assistant directing two plays for Audible. Their combined unemployment income barely covers their rent in NYC—they had just moved to the city in January from Tennessee—so Griffin and her husband are living off of their savings right now and getting health insurance through Medicaid. "We have been very prudent with our spending through this pandemic, and have a small cushion to get us through the immediate future as we continue to search for work. But it's been really disheartening so far," said Griffin.

READ: [Considering a Voiceover Side Hustle? A Few Things You Need to Know](#)

Actor Raymond J. Lee has been learning new skills since the pandemic halted what was supposed to be a banner year for him. He had just come off the Off-Broadway musical "Soft Power" at the Public Theater in fall 2019 when he was cast in "Once Upon a One More Time," the Britney Spears jukebox musical that was scheduled to run in summer 2020 in Chicago before going to Broadway in the fall. Lee was going to sing "From the Bottom of My Broken Heart" on stage

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he recovered from. Since then, the actor has been isolating in his house in Saugerties, N.Y. with his husband and their 6-year-old daughter.

Lee's husband is a freelance consultant and has been able to work from home, but they've still been living cheaply. "Upstate, the groceries are so much cheaper," said Lee. "For about \$100 for a family of three, we can pretty much feed ourselves for the week." So between his husband's income and Lee's unemployment benefits, they've been able to pay the bills. But with the \$600 a week in federal pandemic assistance having expired in July, and talks to extend it have stalled in Congress, Lee is unsure of how the couple will pay their mortgage and other expenses.

Lee's been auditioning for screen and voiceover work that can be done remotely. He has [set up a voiceover studio](#) in his basement, and recorded an audio book that's going to be released in October. Lee had recorded audio books before but it had never been his main income source.

So while at home, Lee's been focusing on building his VO skill-set. "I've been lucky to have my amazing VO agents start me on that track and get me the auditions in the first place," he said. "I would say a huge place to learn about VOs is online! There are lots of YouTube tutorials and videos on how to get started and which mics to use. That was how I did a lot of my research. I have also been coaching with Rhonda Phillips who is an amazing VO coach for the past few months."

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Voiceover 101

Lee's been sending out self-tapes, and he also auditioned for a hand-modeling gig. "I had a Zoom callback which was such an interesting experience," he said. And while he waits to hear back from his auditions, Lee's thinking of a plan B. "If I have to, I will find myself a job up here doing whatever I can," he said. "Because I have a family and we need money to eat and pay our bills." He then added with a sigh, "I love what I do when I can do it. And it's hard not doing that right now."

Equity Calls on Congress

Lee's plight is one felt by the more than 51,000 members of Actors' Equity Association, the union for stage actors and stage managers, who were all put out of work when theaters shut down nationwide. Initially, these actors could claim unemployment and the weekly unemployment benefit from the state plus the \$600 weekly deposit from the federal government was enough to pay their rent and bills.

While Congressional Democrats want to extend the \$600 and passed the HEROES Act in the House to do so, Republicans have wanted to decrease it to \$200 a week. Meanwhile, President Donald J Trump has signed an executive order cutting the weekly federal benefit to \$400 a week, though how it will be implemented and whether it's constitutional has been up for debate as only Congress can allocate funds. The Senate has adjourned until September, after failing to reach a deal on pandemic relief. Without the PUA money, those out of work are only receiving, [on average](#), \$321 a week in state benefits.

[Learn how to land that gig by submitting a great self-tape](#)

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...theater industry is struggling. The Senate is struggling in the way, unfortunately, the saving aid. The Senate must act now and it should make the unemployment benefits retroactive to cover the lapse in payments."

AEA has been lobbying Congress to extend the pandemic assistance. They've gathered over 21,000 signatures on a [petition](#) and made nearly 3,000 calls to Congress in support of the HEROES Act. The union is also calling for a 100% federal COBRA subsidy and \$4 billion in emergency supplement public arts funding.

Meanwhile, with theaters not scheduled to come back until 2021, Equity members have been scrambling to pick up side hustles. Peyton Taylor Becker is a stage manager who was working on the national tour of "Mean Girls" when COVID hit. She lives in New Jersey with her husband, who broke his back last year when a set piece fell on him backstage at "School of Rock" on Broadway rendering Becker the sole income earner in their family.

Becker has started two service jobs: working at a café and bartending at a country club. And because those jobs are dependent on tips, and people have been tipping her 10–15%, her take-home pay has been low. "Last week, I pulled 70 hours and I didn't even make, not even \$800," she said. "Every day, there's so much pressure to turn tables as fast as you can and make as much in tips as you possibly can, which is still not enough."

On top of that, Becker is immunosuppressed because she had a liver transplant, meaning working those jobs is especially dangerous for her, especially when customers don't wear a mask. "It's scary," Becker admitted. "When people are sitting at the tables, and they're just hacking up a lung and sneezing. And you're like, Oh my God, this is it."

Last year, Becker and her husband had bought a house in New Jersey. Both of them are covered under Equity's health insurance; her husband used to be covered under IATSE but his coverage was dropped when he could no longer

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that pay more. But if the situation doesn't improve, the couple may have to leave their home. "If we could find renters for our house, if they could just cover the mortgage and utilities, then maybe we could go to Las Vegas to my mom's," she said. "We would just have to drive across the country and get there. But we could stay there for a couple of months, try and live somewhere rent-free, mortgage-free."

All the artists who spoke for the story emphasized the importance of relief for the arts, and that it's impossible for the more than [five million people who work in the arts and culture sector](#) to pivot entirely to other industries.

"Everyone talks about wanting to go to concerts and live outdoor events and restaurants but no one's talking about theater, which brings in almost \$2 billion dollars every year for New York," said Becker. "I don't know what's gonna happen if [the \$600] doesn't get extended. I don't think \$400 is enough money. I think that \$200 is unacceptable. It's not livable and you're gonna have a lot of people losing homes. People cannot make their way on that."

To keep his own energies up, Lee's done some play readings over Zoom, the pay for which he describes as "lunch money." He thinks that the industry itself isn't powerless; theater producers with means can help out artists during this time by employing them and commissioning work from them, especially artists of color.

"I'm excited to see what happens with the [We See You, White American Theatre] movement with POCs, because that's been such an important movement that's happened recently," he said. "I hope the other side takes it seriously and continues to develop stories and see what they could do to be better. So that when we come back, we're at a better place."

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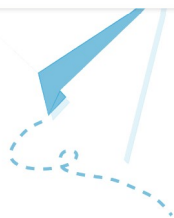
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